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State aims for zero-carbon rail plan

Board approves study on new sources of power from sun, wind, underground heat

By Erik N. Nelson, STAFF WRITER

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SACRAMENTO — The state's embattled high-speed rail program already touts the environmental benefits of its 200-mph-plus electric trains supplanting car and jet trips between Northern and Southern California.

On Wednesday, the state High-Speed Rail Authority board voted to research an Oakland environmental group's idea to make the planned 700-mile "bullet" train system environmentally perfect, at least when it comes to global warming.

Stuart Cohen, executive director of the Transportation and Land Use Coalition, persuaded the authority to look into fostering a new network of sources creating electric power from the sun, wind and underground heat.

Environmental groups are largely supportive of the \$40 billion rail plan because of its potential to channel motorists off of freeways and provide an alternative to flying between Northern and Southern California.

"From the groups that we've been speaking to, this comes up again and again, wanting to eliminate any ambiguity as to the benefits of this program," Cohen told the board.

To that end, the board voted 4-1 to authorize a study of the energy plan by the authority's executive director, Mehdi Morshed. He estimated the study would cost perhaps \$30,000 to \$40,000.

Board member David Crane of San Francisco, who serves as an economic adviser to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, voted against the study, arguing that the authority needs to save its money.

The authority is currently struggling financially after getting only a fraction of what it sought from the Legislature and the governor in this year's budget.

\$10 billion high-speed rail bond measure set for the November ballot also could be swapped for another borrowing package as elected officials try to cope with a major state budget deficit.

"We need to husband our money for getting this thing developed and built," Crane said. "If somebody else were paying for it, I would be satisfied."

But other members applauded the chance to add to the environmental allure of a train that promises to go from San Francisco to Los Angeles in 21/2 hours.

Board member Rod Diridon of San Jose noted that California's leaders have already committed the state to meeting some of the world's most ambitious goals to curb the carbon emissions that cause global warming.

"We can't do that if we're using airplanes and driving," he said, "and we can't do it very efficiently if the electricity to run high-speed rail is from fossil fuels."

Cohen said the idea is not to buy electricity from existing sources of renewable power, as some businesses do by proxy to show their support for the environment.

The idea would be to spark the development of new windmills, geothermal generators or solar facilities near the train's route. The rail system could simply agree to buy a new facility's power or might even help build plants that would be managed by private companies.

For example, there are geothermal vents near Bakersfield with the potential to generate 2,000 megawatts, and there's the possibility of generating 4,500 megawatts of wind power in the Tehachapi Mountains — about 10 percent of the state's current generating capacity, Cohen said.

Cohen said that ultimately, he wants Californians who see exhaust coming out of jet engines at the airport to know "that's the difference between flying and high-speed rail."

The goal, he said, "is to make it crystal-clear that this is the environmental alternative."

Reach Erik Nelson at enelson@bayareanewsgroup.com or 510-208-6410 and read the Capricious Commuter blog at <http://www.INSideBayArea.com>.